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AUTHOR Williamson-Ige, Dorothy
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ABSTRACT

Molefi K. Asante's Afrocentric methodology was used in analysing the rhetoric of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, writer Toni Morrison, and sociologist Robert Staples on the women's movement. Three conclusions were drawn from this analysis: (1) that the three rhetors noted more differences than similarities between black and white females; (2) that they had varying opinions on whether black females should join with white females in the women's movement; and (3) that they disagreed on whether the impact of feminist rhetoric on the black community was positive or negative. In addition to analyzing messages for content, the three spokespersons were ranked in two major categories--best rhetorical effort and best Afrocentric effort. The analysis indicated that Chisholm ranked higher on rhetorical effort, probably because she had appeal to broader audiences, while Morrison and Staples ranked equally high on overall Afrocentric efforts. (Appendixes contain a copy of the measurement instrument used in the study and lists for each rhetor summarizing similarities and differences between black females and white females. A selected bibliography on the topic is also included.) (RI)

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A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS ON BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN REGARDING THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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Dorothy Williamson-Ige, Ph.D.
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio
Program Code #32.07
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Dorothy Williamson-Ige, Ph.D.
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio
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Experts in the field of speech communication have long been concerned with analyzing the spoken word. Recently, with increased media attention on social issues, some rhetoricians have turned to the study of social movements. At the same time, crosscultural communication has gained some long desired attention. This study combines the rhetoric of social movements and cross-cultural communication through viewing the Women's Movement of the majority society in the United States across cultures--specifically from the perspective of African-American culture.

A significant amount of rhetoric has evolved around the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States. However, until the 1980s, this rhetoric seems to have had little effect on the majority of African-American females. This may lead one to ask "Why has the rhetoric not had more positive impact on black women and drawn them into the folds with Women's Liberation advocates of the larger society?" Shirley Chisholm, Toni Morrison, and Robert Staples have speculated on this question. They offer numerous explanations for the hesitancy of black women in embracing the Women's Liberation Movement of Caucasian society. Their reactions are summarized below.

In an effort to remain concise, this paper represents a report of a rhetorical study rather than the rhetorical study itself. Readers interested in detailed examples of actual rhetoric analyzed may refer to the more detailed work by the present author.[1]

The fact that black American rhetoric is analyzed does not mean that only black input is included. In a country with as many diverse cultures as the United States, little, if any, rhetoric exists in isolation. Since the social movement in America largely grew and matured in Caucasian culture, a significant amount of black rhetoric refers to arguments stated by prolific white American spokespersons pro and con on the issues. Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, for instance, are referred to in the study. Yet the critic's primary focus is on black rhetorical response to the Women's Liberation Movement.

This study critically examines the rekindled Feminist Movement of the 1960s to the present time. This era of the Women's Liberation Movement is chosen because the researcher is interested in the impact of this particular body of rhetoric on the present Women's Movement.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and offer criticism of the rhetoric of three African-Americans regarding several important issues of the Feminist Movement. The three spokespersons chosen are: congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, editor and writer Toni Morrison, and professor and sociologist Dr. Robert Staples. They will be referred to as rhetors or spokespersons while the researcher will be referred to as the critic throughout the study. The rhetoric of Chisholm, Morrison, and Staples is chosen because of the different perspectives that the rhetoric offers. Shirley Chisholm takes a pro-Women's Movement view but from a political perspective. Toni Morrison's rhetoric seems appropriate because of its divergence from other rhetors.

Her widely publicized articles as well as her novels reveal skepticism and distrust for white American women and the movement. Robert Staples' ideas are chosen not only to add male perspective but because his messages seem to include a combined approach of pro and con opinions on the Feminist Movement.

The term rhetoric is used broadly to refer to persuasive verbal and nonverbal communication regarding African-American females and the Women's Movement. Rhetoric can be viewed as practical, popular discourse which can serve to alter reality. The rhetoric of the Women's Liberation Movement has had an impact on society. Analyzing the impact of such rhetoric on the African-American community is the major concern of this study. Such an analysis should provide an increased understanding of man's communication behavior in social movement settings.

Rationale

The study is significant for several reasons. First, although there have been works concerning the Black Movement and the Women's Movement in America as well as studies on sex/race stereotyping, a diligent search of the literature has not revealed any work that offers a rhetorical analysis or criticism of black American rhetoric on the Women's Movement. Rhetorical research in this area is clearly lacking.

Second, given our current social and political problems concerning sex and race, such crosscultural research on the Women's Movement

should be welcomed by groups seeking equality of women and ethnic groups. The study should be important to active supporters of the Feminist Movement if they are interested in attracting ethnic groups into the movement--African-American or otherwise. The proposed analysis may offer clues for improving strategies and tactics in bringing minority members into more active participation in the Feminist Movement.

A third reason concerns black women and the larger white American society. Black women may want guidance as to the stand they should take on women's issues. A synthesis and analysis of black leaders' statements on the subject should offer insight and direction from an African-American perspective. Similarly, Caucasian-Americans may be perplexed by the seemingly passive attitude of black people (who have been obvious victims of discrimination) toward the Women's Movement. Black American response may offer information that can help clear up such confusion.

A fourth and important rationale for the study concerns those interested in speech communication; particularly crosscultural study. On the public school level, this study may help teachers and administrators become more cognizant and sensitive to primary concerns of black women. The 1980 Teacher Redesign Program in Speech Education in the state of Ohio calls for proficiency in intercultural education. With minority groups demanding more attention, other states may move in the same direction. This study, in part, responds to that call. On the general education level, objectives, strategies, and program evaluations

can possibly reflect awareness and sensitivity of the race/sex paradigm treated in this study.

In addition to Speech Communication education, the crosscultural nature of the study should also contribute theoretically to other speech communication areas such as interpersonal communication, organizational communication, mass communication, and rhetoric. Becoming aware of varying perceptions, sensitivity, and stereotyping, may lead to improved interpersonal communication in sex/race relationships. Information on sex/race bias can be treated in terms of specific work settings and the larger business world. The same knowledge can also be related to print and broadcast media in mass communication. The study also contributes to rhetorical theory and critical methodology through the discussion of social movement rhetoric and communication behavior during such movements.

A study that addresses itself to black women is significant. As the roles of women and minorities become more pronounced in domestic and foreign policy, the rhetoric of both groups (women and minorities) should become increasingly important as a source of rhetorical study.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is two-fold. First, as the rhetorical analysis will reveal, the Women's Movement seems to have failed in drawing the positive attention and interest of black American females that it has from females in the majority culture. Second, the rhetoric studied

indicates that even those African-Americans who favor the Movement concur that the larger Feminist Movement does not meet the specific needs of black women.

From this general problem, several controversies seem to have arisen. The controversies form the foundation for three research questions answered in this study:

1. Does the rhetoric reveal significant similarities and differences between black and white American women in relation to the Women's Movement?
2. Does the rhetoric of black spokespersons advocate black women joining the larger Women's Liberation Movement or working separately to accomplish rights of African-American women?
3. How has the nature and form of the rhetoric of the present Women's Liberation Movement affected African-American response to the movement?

A communication gap seems to exist between cultures on the subject of the Women's Movement. Analyzing responses of the chosen rhetors to the three research questions should provide clues for solutions to the existing problem of black females and the Women's Movement.

Procedures and Methodology

Procedures

After identifying the problem and reviewing the rhetoric of Women's Liberation, the topic was limited to messages of Chisholm, Morrison, and Staples on the present Women's Movement. Three research questions were formulated that were based around issues which emerged from the rhetoric. The research questions were clearly geared toward rhetorical communication theory.

Methodology and specific criteria based on Molefi Asante's Afrocentric theory of criticism were chosen to analyze and criticize the rhetoric on the Women's Liberation Movement.[2] The particular rhetoric under study was largely taken from reliable printed sources. In some cases, however, audio and visual material, personal letters, and an informal interview were used to collect the data.

Methodology

The chosen methodology and specific criteria are believed to be appropriate for the particular rhetoric under observation. Asante's Afrocentric methodology is based on the concept of utilizing African rather than European history and experiences as the center of rhetorical arguments when studying black rhetors and audiences. He proposes that standard methods of criticism such as Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian concepts, which are often treated as universalities, have European cultural roots. If all universalities arise out of cultures, then to apply one set of measurements to the peculiarities of another culture's art is asking " . . . the apple to compare to the mango's sweetness and softness."[3] Asante advocates studying black rhetoric using Afrocentric philosophy because it dispenses with imported views and places African-American speakers and black audiences at the center of the rhetorical process.

Afrocentric criteria proposed by Asante is not unique in terms of content as much as in terms of interpretation. While the criteria is based on fairly standard rhetorical theory, it is defined in terms of a black worldview. The criteria used consists of: Theme, Audience Composition, and Speaker's Presence.[4] The theme deals with the recurring statements on majors issues of the Women's Liberation Movement in the case of this paper. Asante refers to Audience Composition in terms of three groups--the living, the ancestors, and the unborn audience and infers that black speakers have hopes and commitments to all three types of audiences. Speaker's Presence deals with the Person (source), and the Speech (message). The speech contains six components. The first three components are Style, Logic, and Emotion; which are familiar terms in rhetorical theory with the exception that they are analyzed here from a black worldview. The fourth component is Indirection which is described as a round-about way of getting to the central point--beating, not around, but on the bush. Appeal to Folklore is a fifth component which places emphasis on the African past and black culture. A sixth component, Memory of the Past, is remembering the culture; what the elders said, and how they sound in content and delivery.

The rhetoric of Chisholm, Morrison, and Staples was analyzed on the first research question.[5] Does the rhetoric reveal significant similarities and differences between black

and white American women in relation to the Women's Movement? While Chisholm noted more differences than similarities between black and white females, she tended to devote equal attention to both similarities and differences. Morrison, on the other hand, tended to ignore similarities altogether and stress differences only. Staples noted similarities but placed more emphasis on differences in black and white feminist concerns. (See Appendix A for a list of similarities and differences noted by the three rhetors).

The rhetoric of Chisholm, Morrison, and Staples was also analyzed on the second research question.[6] Does the rhetoric of black spokespersons advocate black women joining the larger Women's Liberation Movement or working separately to accomplish rights of African-American women? Chisholm indicated that black females should join forces with white females in the Women's Liberation struggle. She indicated that black women need to work both separately and in unison with other American females. By contrast, Morrison's rhetoric indicates that the Women's Movement is not needed. She calls for a human movement instead. Staples suggests that black women need female liberation but should work separately from white feminists.

The third research question dealt more specifically with the effects of the rhetoric.[7] How has the nature and form of the rhetoric of the present Women's Liberation Movement affected African-American response to the Movement? Chisholm

perceives the effect of women's rhetoric as positive; indicating that she has experienced more sexism than racism from black and white men. The congresswoman believes that Women's Liberation rhetoric has caused black American females to gain increased political interest and experience. Writer, Toni Morrison tends to perceive the effects negatively. She urges that black men and women need to show compassion toward each other and work for common, more humane concerns. Staples' rhetoric also perceives Women's Liberation rhetoric as affecting black females adversely. According to the sociologist, black women have recently used women's rhetoric to attack their own men rather than the system which suppresses minorities and women.

In addition to analyzing messages for content, the three spokespersons were ranked in two major categories--best rhetorical effort and best Afrocentric effort made by the rhetors. Rhetorical effort was based on standard communication and persuasion theory rather than effects. Afrocentric effort was judged in terms of whether or not issues were interpreted from a black worldview. Each time, Chisholm ranked higher on rhetorical effort for each of the three research questions treated because she had appeal to broader audiences while Morrison and Staples surpassed her on each research question in being more Afrocentric. While either may have been more Afrocentric on a particular question, both Morrison and Staples

tended to rank equally high on Afrocentric effort overall on the three research questions analyzed, with Chisholm trailing in this area. (See Appendix B for rankings on each of the three questions).

Major Findings

As indicated earlier, this paper should be considered a report of findings of a rhetorical study rather than a rhetorical study itself with numerous specific statements given by rhetors. In general, the study yielded two major findings. First, rhetors Chisholm, Morrison, and Staples noted more differences than similarities between black and white females, have varying opinions on whether black women should join with white women in the Women's Movement struggle, and disagree on whether the impact of feminist rhetoric has had a positive or negative effect on the black community. Secondly, it was found that Afrocentric methodology contributed significantly to rhetorical theory in studying the social movement. The writer found Afrocentric philosophy more meaningful in terms of interpretation from a black worldview than in terms of unique criteria.

Implications

The overall problem of black females not joining with white females in the Women's Movement seems to be a cross-cultural communication problem. Thus approaching the issue from a communication standpoint seems to be an appropriate strategy

Based on the rhetors studied, it appears that African-American women do not perceive the Women's Liberation Movement as meeting their specific needs. What are the underlying implications of the study regarding the Feminist Movement and our general communication behavior regarding movement issues? On the issue of sexism, perhaps both males and females can avoid defensive attitudes if we perceive a pro-women viewpoint as not necessarily representing an anti-male posture and vice versa. The same concept can be applied to race in regard to Women's Liberation concerns. A black worldview on the part of African-American females may not necessarily represent an anti-white perception on the issues and vice versa.

The Women's Movement theme of demanding sexual equality with men is comprehensive and complicated. It is powerful enough to affect every fiber of American life. Women's Movement concerns have certainly caused a stir in the black American community. The overall implications may not be known for a long time.

NOTES

[1]Dorothy Williamson-Ige, "Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Modern Black American Spokespersons on the Women's Liberation Movement," Dissertation. The Ohio State University (1980).

[2]Molefi K. Asante, "Afrocentricity as Method in Discourse Criticism," Unpublished paper, Speech Communication Association Convention, San Antonio, Texas, (November, 1979) 1-9.

[3]Ibid., p. 2.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Williamson-Ige, "Rhetorical Analysis," pp. 22-107.

[6]Ibid., pp. 108-168.

[7]Ibid., pp. 169-225.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The following lists are summaries of paraphrased similarities and differences that surfaced in the rhetoric of Shirley Chisholm, Toni Morrison, and Robert Staples during the rhetorical analysis and criticism. The lists of generalizations should be thought of as "tendencies" rather than "allness" statements by the rhetors. The reader should realize (as the rhetors did) that exceptions exist to all generalizations:

*SHIRLEY CHISHOLM

Similarities:

1. All women suffer sexual discrimination.
2. All women are interested in stock women's issues such as day care centers, family planning, fighting job related discrimination, fair handling of rape cases, etc.
3. Sexual discrimination hurts all men as well as all women.
4. All women are their worst enemies at times in feeding sexual oppression.

*Note: Chisholm mentions more differences but tends to stress similarities & differences simultaneously.

Differences:

1. Black women suffer the twin jeopardies of sex & race.
2. Since most black women are not middle-class or professional, the Women's Movement does not meet many of their needs.
3. The Women's Movement downplays religion while many black females respect it.
4. Unlike white females, black women do not have the economic choice of whether or not they want to work.
5. Black females usually do not interpret motherhood as oppressive as some white females tend to do.
6. Black females suffer rejection from their own men because of the dominant media's white western standards of beauty. Black females who do not meet the standards often suffer low self-concept.
7. Black women suffer rejection because of their strength & independence--needed to avoid racial extinction when black men were more severely oppressed.

TONI MORRISON

Similarities:

Differences:

1. White feminists stress material and professional concerns while black women are largely interested in humane, spiritual, & survival issues.

2. The Women's Movement downplays religion while many black females respect it.

3. Black females usually do not interpret motherhood as oppressive as some white females tend to do.

4. Black females suffer rejection from their own men because of the dominant media's white western standards of beauty. Black females who do not meet the standards often suffer low self-concept.

5. Black women suffer rejection because of their strength & independence--needed to avoid racial extinction when black men were more severely oppressed.

6. Black females are highly individualistic & dislike classifications such as "women's libbers."

7. White feminist rhetoric tends to be hostile toward all men. Black women are still committed to heterosexual relationships.

8. Based on past history, it is suspected that white females will use their race to get ahead at the expense of black females.

TONI MORRISON (Continued)

Similarities:

Differences (continued):

9. Black females already have the independence that white females now seek.

10. Black females have always maintained the friendships & "sisterhood" that white females now seek. This was also needed to survive.

11. The largely white Women's Movement is contradictory. Professional women seek liberation while leaving menial tasks to minority females.

12. The Women's Movement is in competition & conflict with the Black Movement.

13. Black females are different because they view themselves differently and are viewed differently from white females.

ROBERT STAPLES

Similarities:

1. In the past, both black Americans and women have accepted their subordinate role, thus contributing to their exploitation.

2. Blacks and women are discriminated against because of physical traits (skin color & sex).

3. All women & minorities have been socialized into inferior occupational roles.

Differences:

1. Black females often suffer triple burdens of poverty, racism, & sexism.

2. White females are inside the system with the oppressor while black females remain outside with no influence or economic clout.

3. White & black women have different goals. One wants "in" the job market while the latter wants "out."

4. Black females usually do not interpret motherhood as oppressive as some white females tend to do.

ROBERT STAPLES (Continued)

Similarities:

4. Both women & African-Americans have suffered oppressive language. Women were called "Girls" & were identified by "Mrs." or "Miss" when no distinctions were made for men. Black males were called "Boys."

5. Women & minorities have the same enemies: Southerners, conservatives, male legislators, literal interpreters of the Bible & established politicians fearful of disturbing the balance of power.

Differences (continued):

5. Black females suffer rejection from their own men because of the dominant media's white western standards of beauty. Black females who do not meet the standards often suffer low self-concept.

6. Black men reject black women because society has forced the latter to be strong & independent to survive. Thus the history of black women is different.

7. The oppression of black men hurt black women because it allowed the latter to be exploited more sexually & demeaned in white kitchens.

8. Based on past history, it is suspected that white females will use their race to get ahead at the expense of black females.

9. Black females already have the independence that white females now seek.

10. The Women's Movement is in competition & conflict with the Black Movement.

11. Sexual oppression is a matter of interpretation (roles may be different but equal); racial discrimination of all minorities is a matter of fact.

12. A severe shortage of black men has caused interpersonal problems in black female/male relations. Fighting black men over sexual rights will cause more division. The social situation differs for blacks.

APPENDIX B

Rhetorical criticism of the question--Does the rhetoric reveal significant similarities and differences between black and white American women in relation to the Women's Movement?

	RHETORICAL EFFORT			AFROCENTRIC EFFORT		
	Chisholm	Morrison	Staples	Chisholm	Morrison	Staples
Theme	1	3	1	1	1	1
Audience Composition	1	3	1	1	2	1
Person	1	1	1	1	1	1
Style	1	2	2	3	1	1
Logic	3	2	1	1	1	1
Emotion	1	1	1	2	1	1
Indirection	*	3	2	*	2	1
Folklore & Past Memory	1	2	1	1	1	1
	6(1s)	2(1s)	6(1s)	5(1s)	6(1s)	8(1s)

More Appropriate Rhetorical Effort — Chisholm & Staples — Morrison — Less Appropriate Rhetorical Effort

More Afro-centric Effort — Staples — Morrison — Chisholm — Less Afro-centric Effort

Key

1 = Best Effort
2 = Good Effort
3 = Fair Effort
* = Purposefully & appropriately uses direction versus indirection.

Rhetorical Criticism of the question--Does the rhetoric of black spokespersons advocate black women joining the larger Women's Liberation Movement or working separately to accomplish rights of African-American women?

	RHETORICAL EFFORT			AFROCENTRIC EFFORT		
	Chisholm	Morrison	Staples	Chisholm	Morrison	Staples
Theme	1	2	3	2	1	2
Audience Composition	1	2	3	2	1	2
Person	1	1	1	2	1	1
Style	1	2	3	2	1	2
Logic	1	1	1	2	1	1
Emotion	2	1	1	2	1	1
Indirection	3	1	2	3	1	2
Folklore & Past Memory	1	2	2	1	1	1
	6(1s)	4(1s)	3(1s)	1(1)	6(2s)	8(1s)	4(1s)	4(2s)

More Appropriate Rhetorical Effort: Chisholm, Morrison, Staples — Less Appropriate Rhetorical Effort

More Afro-centric Effort: Morrison, Staples, Chisholm — Less Afro-centric Effort

Key

1 = Best Effort
2 = Good Effort
3 = Fair Effort

Rhetorical criticism of the question--How has the nature and form of the rhetoric of the present Women's Liberation Movement affected African-American response to the movement?

	RHETORICAL EFFORT			AFROCENTRIC EFFORT		
	Chisholm	Morrison	Staples	Chisholm	Morrison	Staples
Theme	1	2	3	2	2	1
Audience Composition	1	3	2	2	2	1
Person	2	2	2	2	2	2
Style	1	2	3	2	1	2
Logic	1	2	1	2	1	2
Emotion	3	3	1	3	1	1
Indirection	*	1	1	*	1	1
Folklore & Past Memory	1	2	2	2	1	1
	5(1s)	5(2s)	1(1) 3(2s) &3(1s)	6(2s)	5(1s)	5(1s)

More Appropriate Rhetorical Effort — Chisholm — Morrison & Staples — Less Appropriate Rhetorical Effort

More Afro-centric Effort — Morrison & Staples — Chisholm — Less Afro-centric Effort

Key

1 = Best Effort
2 = Good Effort
3 = Fair Effort
* = Purposefully & appropriately uses direction versus indirection.

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